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STATE FOR NEA/ELA - IRWIN, NEA/ELA - LAWSON, NEA/PPD, R,
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SUBJECT: Lebanon: Media Reaction - December 17, 2008

Atmospherics:

The Russian MiG-29 airplane "gift" to Lebanon eclipsed all other events, even the shoe-throwing incident. All newspapers headlined the "surprising" and "unexpected" Russian gift, noting that the Lebanese Minister of Defense did not expect it. Several newspapers highlighted the qualities of the MiG-29 airplanes, observing that they are a quality addition to the Lebanese Army's capabilities. They also claimed that such a gift means that the international community has labeled Lebanon as a sovereign, independent country. Only Arab nationalist As-Safir questioned whether Russia has given Lebanon this gift, noting that neither the Russian authorities nor the Russian Ambassador to Lebanon confirmed the news.

Selected Headlines

"The Majority Confirms that The Doha Agreement is a Settlement and Ta'if is the Agreement; Minister El-Murr and the 'Huge Surprise:' Ten Russian MiG-29 airplanes to the Army" Moderate, anti-Syrian An-Nahar

"Ten MiG-29 Airplanes a Russian Gift to Lebanon" pro-Hariri Al-Mustaqbal

"Who Will Pay for MiG-29, who will Protect it and Where will they be Used?" Arab nationalist As-Safir

Block Quotes:

"The MiG-29 Is a Positive Shock for Lebanese Public Opinion, but Raises Western Diplomatic Questions," an editorial by Khalil Flayhan in moderate, anti-Syrian An-Nahar (12/17):

"Minister of Defense Elias El-Murr's announcement that Russia agreed to provide the Army with ten MiG-29 fighter airplanes was a positive shock for the Lebanese. American, European, and Arab circles, however, wondered over the news. Diplomatic sources in Beirut noted that Israel is most likely to criticize this deal sharply and will claim that it is a direct threat against its security. ...As a result, Israel will probably increase its aerial violations of Lebanese airspace. ...Experts in military airplanes noted that this is the first time Lebanon will be buying Russian arms. ...They expressed the belief that this change means that Lebanon has started to change its strategy. ...They also noted that Syria has about 500 of these airplanes...but the newer version is the MiG 32 or 35. ...The same sources were not 'excited' about this surprise because 'no one knows how to work on these airplanes in the near future.' They noted that the Army needs light airplanes Lebanese pilots are trained for..."

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